

Quarterly

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LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM
EXPOSITION PARK • LOS ANGELES 7, CALIFORNIA

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FIG. 1—The Barranca de Cobre from the west rim, with the Urique River far below

MEXICO'S GRAND CANYON

The Museum Expedition to the Barranca de Cobre

"Señor, far to the eastward in the high mountains of Chihuahua there is a great canyon, so deep that only the birds travel to its bottom!" So it was, twenty years ago, that William J. Sheffler first heard of the Barranca de Cobre, or "canyon of copper."

The story of the Museum's recent expedition to the Barranca de Cobre really had its beginning when the Mexicans and Indians living at Rancho

Guirocoba (Mr. Sheffler's large ranch in southeastern Sonora) came to him with this tale of a fabulous canyon, deep in the heart of the Mexican Sierra Madre.

W. J. Sheffler ("Bill" to his close friends) is a prominent Los Angeles business man, who has ornithology as his avocation. In addition to his many contributions to the knowledge of western ornithology, especially that of northwestern

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Mexico, Mr. Sheffler is an internationally known aviculturist with large aviaries of exotic birds from many parts of the world.

Four attempts have been made by Mr. Sheffler to reach the Barranca, and each of the first three had fallen short of the goal, for various reasons. On one occasion business responsibilities necessitated a postponement of plans. The outbreak of World War II halted a second attempt, and a third try was suddenly terminated when a very important member of the party—no less a person than the expedition cook!—suffered a broken neck in an automobile accident in Arizona. But during the winter of 1949, the urge to reach the Barranca burned anew in Bill Sheffler's heart, and out of seclusion came maps and plans

for a fourth attempt to reach the great canyon's depths. The Los Angeles County Museum was invited to participate in the adventure this time, and by early spring of 1950 the Sheffler-Los Angeles Museum Mexican Expedition was a reality, with its members eager to begin the long trek to the canyon.

Selecting the personnel for an expedition always poses a problem, as there are often a hundred applicants for each opening in the party. In order to keep the size of the expedition from becoming unwieldy, it was decided that the largest number of persons who could operate as a team would be six men. Needless to say, Mr. Sheffler topped the list as the expedition's sponsor and leader. Representing the museum were

FIG. 2—Map with dotted line indicating the route taken from Los Angeles to the Barranca de Cobre

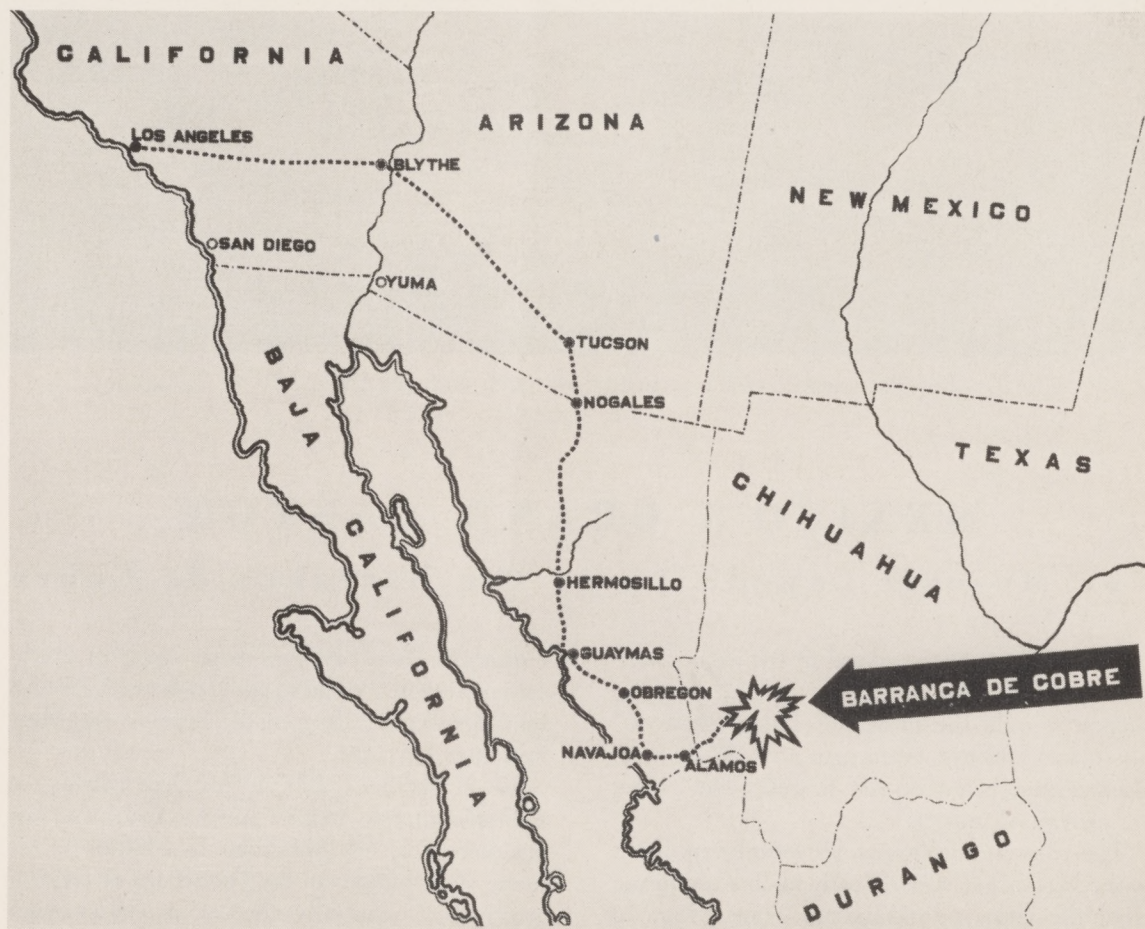




FIG. 3—Left to right: William J. Sheffler, Jack L. Murray, Ralph Crane, Robert M. Ariss and (kneeling) Kenneth E. Stager

Kenneth E. Stager as ornithologist and mammalogist, and Robert M. Ariss as anthropologist, to study the Tarahumare Indians known to inhabit the Barranca area. Expedition photographer was Jack Murray, a Los Angeles business man who, aside from his business pursuits, was known to be an excellent motion picture and still photographer. LIFE Magazine, upon hearing about the operation, asked to be included. This request was granted, and LIFE assigned one of its most able photographers, Mr. Ralph Crane, to cover the expedition for that magazine.* Stoney Brooks of Ehrenberg, Arizona (the same expedition cook who had suffered the broken neck just before the third planned Barranca trip) joined the group

as cook. Stoney had fully recovered from his mishap and had vowed that he would see the great canyon, come what might.

The last few weeks prior to departure were full of activity. Equipment of many kinds was assembled, anticipated trail problems were discussed, and additional maps of the area were sought and studied. Permits to collect birds and mammals for scientific study were secured from the Mexican government, as well as gun permits to enable the ornithologists to transport their indispensable bird-collecting guns across the border.

It was planned to make the first phase of the trip by truck and station wagon to Mr. Sheffler's ranch at Guirocoba in southeastern Sonora, and the second and final portion with a pack train from the ranch to the canyon.

Enthusiastic hearsay reports about the canyon estimated its depth and size as ranging from twice to seven times the depth of the Grand Canyon of the

Colorado. An examination of maps and charts, however, immediately satisfied us that this was not the case, because the elevations shown on the maps were not great enough to permit such a depth. Of one thing we were confident, that in the heart of the Mexican sierra there was a great canyon which quite likely equalled the Grand Canyon in depth. The weeks that followed proved us right.

Rather than the magnitude of this great canyon, it was the zoological secrets it held that led us south and into its depths. Two questions were uppermost in our minds—questions which

*See "Into the Depths of a Hidden Canyon" (LIFE, Sept. 25, 1950).



FIG. 4—Overnight camp in the thorn forest between Alamos and Rancho Guirocoba

have been pondered by ornithologists for many years. The first of these came from the knowledge that certain species of birds which live and nest in the midwestern United States migrate southward into Mexico and central America in the winter and return in the spring. This phenomenon of bird migration is, in itself, not startling; but when lowland birds are found on one side of a great mountain range (the Sierra Madre Occidental of western Mexico) in the spring, and on the opposite side (on the coastal plain of Sinaloa) in the winter, the ornithologist seeks some logical explanation, as birds of the lowlands do not commonly migrate across mountains. It has been suggested that these migrating birds enter the shallow upper reaches of the Barranca, and using its winding course as a flyway, are able to reach the coastal plain.

The second question to which we were seeking an answer was whether or not the bottom of the canyon, because of its low elevation, harbored arid tropical flora similar to that in the western lowlands of southern Sonora and Sinaloa. If such was found to be the case, then we could fully expect to find tropical forms of birds and mammals inhabiting this long tropical corridor which penetrates northward into the heart of the Sierra Madre.

In answer to these two questions, we found that if the birds in question are using the Barranca as a flyway, it still remains to be proven, as our arrival at the bottom of the canyon was possibly too late to observe them passing northward. A number of other migrating species were found in the canyon's depths, but not the ones looked for. The second question was answered

in that we were definitely able to verify the presence of arid tropical flora in the lower reaches of the canyon, and an abundance of arid tropical bird life dwelling therein.

The long awaited day of departure finally arrived on the morning of April 26, 1950. With the sturdy Dodge Power Wagon loaded to capacity with heavy equipment and the station wagon filled with four members of the party, bedrolls, camera equipment etc., the expedition rolled away from the Museum southeastwards toward Mexico and an unique adventure. Across the desert to Blythe, then into Arizona—stopping just long enough at Ehrenberg to pick up Stoney Brooks, our cowboy cook—the party continued onward and soon left Phoenix and then Tucson behind, arriving at the international border at Nogales, Arizona, on the evening of April 27th.

The following morning the expedition was confronted with the task of clearing personnel, trucks, field equipment and guns through the Mexican Customs. Many problems frequently arise in connection with as large an undertaking as the expedition represented, and we dared not estimate how long a time the process of clearing customs would entail. Gustavo Benson, Bill Sheffler's custom broker in Nogales, was on hand to meet us, however, and we found that he had already completed many of the necessary formalities attendant upon such an operation. Gun permits had been secured, descriptions of equipment given the Customs men, and within a short time the necessary inspections had been completed and the courteous Mexican officials waved us through with their wishes

for good luck and the success of our plans.

Southward from Nogales, over excellent paved roads, the miles dropped rapidly behind, with the big power wagon acting as pace setter. The well known seacoast town of Guaymas was reached shortly after nightfall, and after a brief pause for dinner, we continued several miles on south of Empalme and then made camp for the night.

On the way again early next morning, our route carried us south through the Yaqui country, where the presence of crumbling military garrisons gave reminder that it was not many years past that travel through the region had to be regulated from one fort to another, and accom-

FIG. 5—Expedition personnel and pack train on the day of departure from Rancho Guirocoba





FIG. 6—Expedition packmen and guide, Juan Vega: (left to right, rear) Roberto Reyes, Felipe Ramirez, Ramon Reyes, Jose Miranda; (front row) Pancho Valenzuela, Juan Vega, Jose Coronado, Chico Reyes

plished during the daylight hours, because of the fear of Yaqui raids and ambush. The actual road pavement ended forty miles south of Guaymas, but from this point the road continued good, as it was well graded and being prepared for surfacing—a program which is being pushed very rapidly down the west coast of Mexico. It was along this stretch of road that we encountered our only vehicle trouble—a very flat tire on the power wagon, caused by running a road surveyor's stake into one of the large rear tires. Except for the station wagon boiling a bit on the last leg of the motor trip, no mechanical difficulties were encountered.

Across the Yaqui and Mayo rivers, each negotiated by means of native ferries, the road led through Ciudad Obregon and finally to Navojoa. At Navojoa we turned eastward toward the old city of Alamos, and the night of April 29th found us camped in the arid tropical thorn forest west of Alamos. In this region the plant growth and bird life differed strikingly from that of the north. The thorn forest looked very dry at that time of the year, being of a deciduous nature and having shed all its leaves. Large numbers of different tropical birds were encountered here — numerous bright-colored parrots of two species, brilliantly colored trogons, bright yellow and black orioles, magpie jays with long azure-blue tail feathers—all of which tended to give the area a tropical atmosphere.

The road from Navojoa to Alamos is a dirt, dry-weather track easily travelled during the dry portion of the year. The remaining distance into Alamos was covered during the early part of the morning, and mid-morning found the expedition in that picturesque and charming old city. It would have been very pleasant to linger in Alamos, but our destination, Rancho Guirocoba, lay only thirty-five miles beyond to the southeast, and the museum caravan pushed on toward that goal.

The roads had been good as far as Alamos, but from here to Guirocoba their very existence seemed to cease. The Guirocoba road degenerated into a rough, rocky track which, though no great barrier to the power wagon, became almost

impassable to the light station wagon. It soon became evident that our slow progress on the rough road would not enable us to reach Guirocoba that night, so camp was made in the thorn forest, and the remaining distance completed the following morning of May 1st.

Rolling into Guirocoba at noon, we found the ranch buzzing with expedition preparations. Although there was no telephone in the area, the native grapevine or "brush telegraph" had conveyed word ahead that our arrival was imminent, and Clay Montgomery, Bill Sheffler's jovial and very able ranch manager, was awaiting us. The organizing of the pack train had been completed by Mr. Montgomery several days

before our arrival, and awaiting us was an impressive string of twenty-six pack burros, nine riding mules, and eight capable Mexican packmen or "arrieros." The mass of expedition equipment and supplies was soon unloaded from the trucks, and the latter were made ready for their long period of idleness by disconnecting batteries, and covering them to protect them from the elements.

As is usually the case, it was found that the little burros couldn't possibly transport all the equipment we had assembled, so a careful re-grouping of needed items was made. Two o'clock the next afternoon found the pack train fully loaded and the expedition ready to move eastward toward Sinaloa. The guide for

the long journey to the Barranca was a professional packman by the name of Juan Vega, who, like all of the other seven men, lived at Rancho Guirocoba. Juan was an exceedingly capable man, and his tremendous knowledge of the country before us, and the high esteem in which he was held by the people we were to meet during the following weeks, proved invaluable. Each packman was nursemaid to approximately five burros or mules, and it was up to each man to see that his respective burros kept up with the train, did not lose their precious cargo, and always had their loads adjusted properly, so as to prevent pack sores. These hardy men (one was over seventy years of age) walked all the way to the Canyon and back, each one following behind his particular string of pack animals.

FIG. 7—Trail camp at Cusaraga, an area high in the mountains of Chihuahua which yielded many rare birds

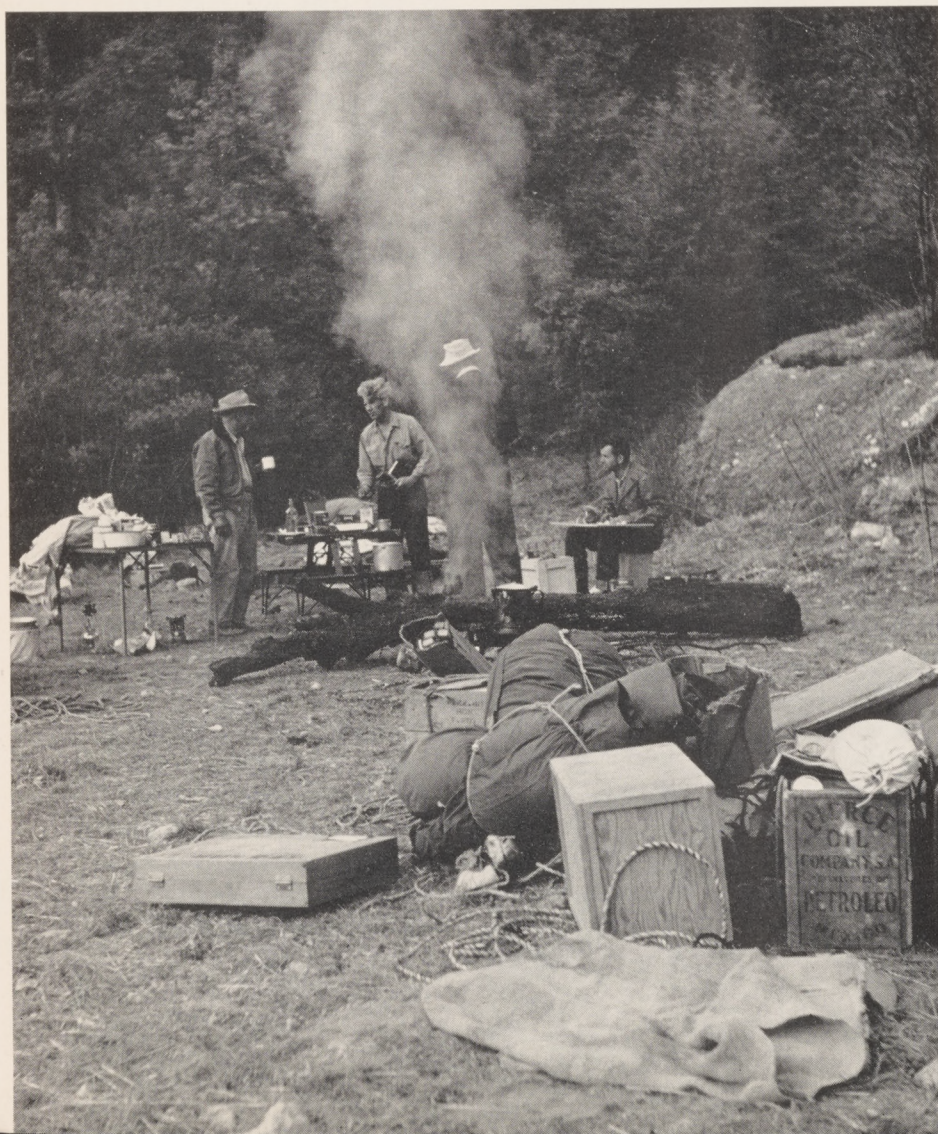




FIG. 8—The writer passing down a specimen of owl taken from a hollow in the tree trunk

For the first half-hour after moving out from the ranch all was confusion, as the twenty-six burros seemed to have twenty-six different ideas as to the direction in which the Barranca lay. But the packers soon had the animals oriented, and the expedition headed eastward toward the hot Fuerte valley of northern Sinaloa.

The Barranca de Cobre is located in the southwestern corner of Chihuahua, about 100 miles northeast of Guirocoba, and had the expedition headed directly toward the canyon it would have been necessary to traverse considerable mountain

terrain. By heading east into northern Sinaloa, and more or less following the drainage system, it was possible to avoid several days of unnecessary mountain trails.

The first five days led through low, hot country where water was extremely scarce, and the long hours on the trail were hard on man and beast. The day began before dawn, with the *arrieros* bringing in the pack animals from the grazing areas, feeding them their daily ration of corn, and then saddling up ready for departure. By the time the men returned with the animals, the rest of the camp was astir, breakfast out of the way, and men and equipment ready for the trail. The pack train would usually travel until noon or one o'clock, rest for two hours at some water hole or spring known to Juan Vega, and then pack out and ride again until sundown. A day in the saddle made the evening camp and sleeping bags a welcome sight. The day never ended at this point for the ornithologists, however, as nighttime was the

only opportunity for preparation of bird specimens collected on the trail during the day. As a result, the gasoline lanterns often burned very late over the bird-skinning table, while the rest of the camp dreamed of a far-off canyon.

On the fifth day the Rio Chinipas was reached. This large river flows into the Fuerte river from the Barranca de Chinipas—a lesser sized barranca located to the west of the Barranca de Cobre. After a much-needed swim and a short rest, the party forded the river at a shallow point and then began to climb into the great Sierra Madre

proper. From here on it was no longer possible to avoid the mountain trails.

The trail now led continually upward. The elevation at the ranch was 1450 feet but we were now rising steadily to higher elevations. We left the arid tropical zone far below, and the trail now led through great stands of oak woodland. Small settlements were occasionally encountered in the little valleys, but they became fewer in number as we travelled farther into the Sierra Madre. May 7th found us crossing the Chihuahua border at a little village called Tierras Colorados, and after a short ride from there we were among the pines, at 6000 feet. The days were pleasantly warm at this higher level and the nights were beginning to be noticeably cool. No longer was it a problem to find watering places, as springs and small streams were plentiful. Campsites were available for the choosing, and a halt in the day's travel could be called at almost any point desired.

During the next few days the party pushed forward at a rapid pace, and on May 12th reached the small village of Churo which is located close to the west rim of the great Barranca. Arrival here marked the end of the long pack trip, as the head of the trail which descends into the canyon's depths is but a few hours' ride northeast of Churo, at a point overlooking the canyon and properly called Cumbre, or crest.

A base camp was established at Cumbre late in the afternoon, and the work of making a zoological reconnaissance of the area began. For descriptive purposes, the following transcription of ac-

tual wire recordings made by the expedition is quoted:

"At this moment (May 16, 1950) the expedition is on the west rim of the Barranca de Cobre in Chihuahua, Mexico. We are at an elevation of a little better than 8,200 feet and we are located northwest of the Indian village of Churo. The expedition arrived here two days ago. We have been preparing equipment for the descent into the Barranca and during that time the photographers have been busy photographing the great Barranca from the rim, and the biologists have been busy making a survey of the bird life of the area. The canyon lies below us but we can't see the bottom at the moment because it is filled with morning haze and shadows.

FIG. 9—Bill Sheffler preparing bird specimens, while Ramon Reyes, one of the packmen, looks on





FIG. 10—Young Crane Hawk captured near Guirocoba

Members of the expedition have been peering down into this great canyon for two days, and we will try to give you a word picture as to how it appears to us.

"Most of us have seen a number of the outstanding natural and man-made wonders of the world, but I am sure we will all agree that this great chasm ranks high amongst them. We will prepare to measure the depth of the Barranca as we descend, but as to its width we can only guess. It is many miles across, at any rate, and our estimates agree that it ranges from five miles in width at some points to twenty miles at others, measured from the outer rims. At the point where we plan to descend into the canyon, the Barranca runs from north to south. The rim is clothed in heavy pine timber with pines extend-

ing down the canyon slope, except where the wall consists of sheer cliffs which drop off for a thousand feet in many instances. Many great lateral canyons cut the rim to form the network which feeds the Urique River in the bottom of the Barranca. The Barranca is so vast that one can see large peaks extending from the haze below. These are formed by interlacing of dozens of large arroyos which join the river far below. Yesterday, after the morning haze lifted, we could see the belt of oaks which is located below the pines and finally the arid tropical belt consisting of giant pitahaya cactus and broad leaf trees in the bottom. The Barranca is so vast that it is difficult to find words which properly describe its magnitude. Our guide, Juan Vega, has located a trail which he feels will enable the expedition to reach the bottom of the Barranca, and the next two days will be spent in that operation." . . .

"We are at the bottom of the Barranca de Cobre. It has taken us two days to make the descent. We started down early morning day before yesterday, May 16th. Our point of de-

parture at the rim is at an elevation slightly over 8,200 feet.

"On the first day, we managed to descend to a point at 4,700 feet elevation. We made camp at that point and for a campsite picked a clump of trees on the side of the Barranca. It seemed that the particular clump of trees that we picked also was the roosting place of hundreds of red-fronted parrots, because, as evening approached, great numbers of these birds swarmed into the trees above our camp to roost. On the second day we got an early start and continued downward. The trail became progressively worse, but we had no serious casualties. At one point, a burro lost its footing and rolled over three times, but was righted and apparently suffered no real injury. The bottom of the Barranca was reached

early this afternoon. At the point where we reached the banks of the Urique River our altimeter showed an elevation of 2,900 feet, showing the Barranca to be a little over a mile deep at this point. We did not descend from the highest point of the rim, so the overall depth of the canyon is even greater than the depth we have reported here.

"Now for a bit of description of the sides of this big canyon. As was mentioned before, the rim is clothed in a heavy cover of pine timber which extends down the sides of the Barranca, and as we travelled downward we found that the pines ended almost evenly at 6,000 feet elevation. In some places a finger of pines can be seen extending down a narrow fissure on the canyon wall, but the overall break was at 6,000 feet.

From here we passed through a belt of oaks and these in turn thinned out at approximately 4,500 feet. At this point, we began to descend into the arid tropical type of vegetation, and at 4,000 feet we encountered our first giant pitahaya cactus. Thorny and deciduous type plants became increasingly abundant, and as we reached the Urique River at the bottom of the Barranca we found large kapok and wild fig trees. It's very hot and humid down here, with very little wind to stir the air.

"Camp has been made at a point along the river where we have the most shade, but there is little of that at the best. We cannot see the rim of the Barranca from our camp here, as the view is masked by great mountains and cliffs, which form a part of the lower reaches of the

FIG. 11—Tarahumare Indian women grinding corn and baking tortillas in the Barranca area



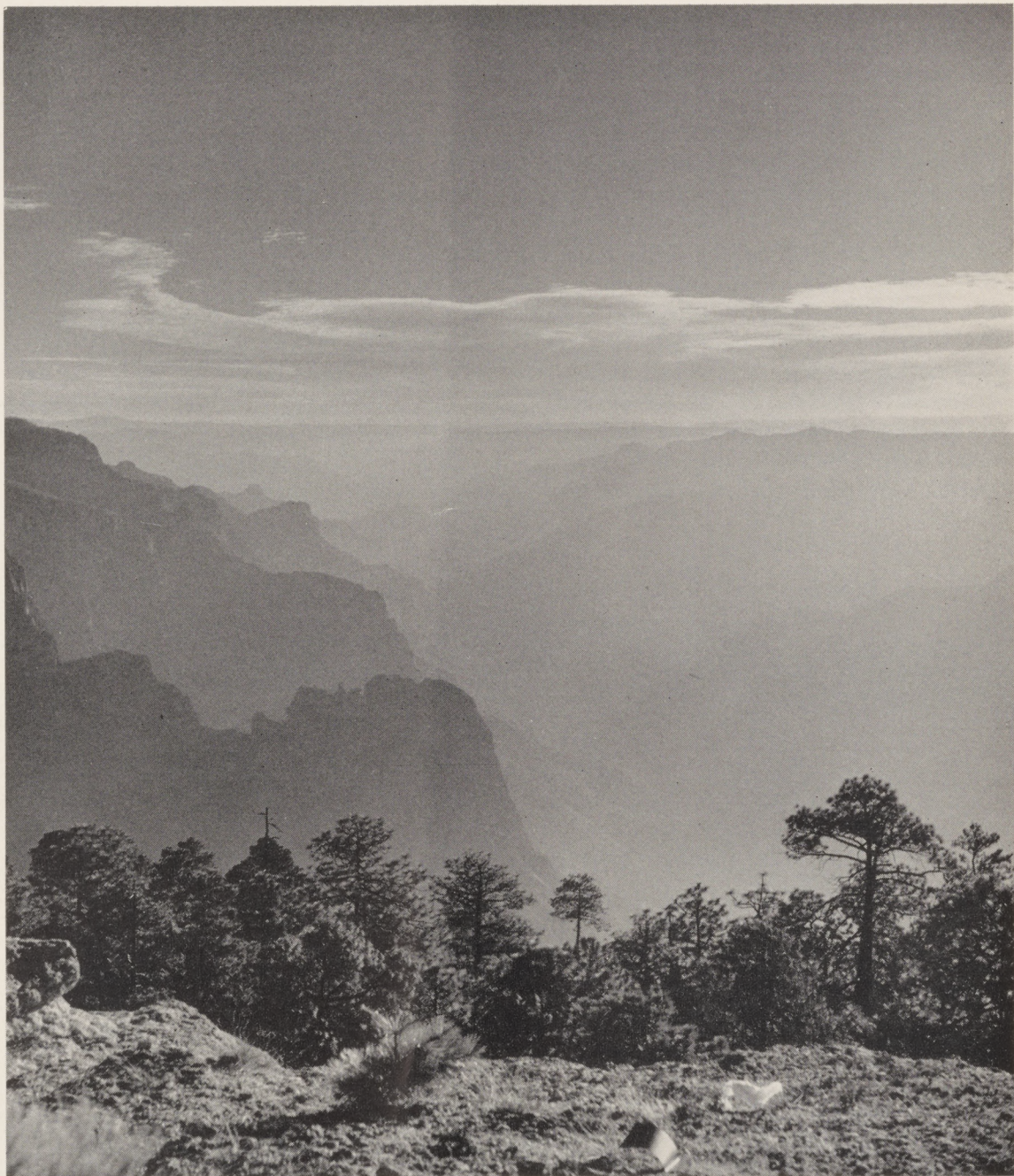


FIG. 12—View to the north, from the expedition's base camp on the west rim. The Barranca de Cobre with early morning haze in the canyon's depths

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canyon. The river is at a low stage at this time of the year, but a great deal of water is flowing through even now. There are great pools along the river course and members of the Expedition have already been in for a swim. We don't know just how long we will be here at the bottom, as that depends on weather, food, supplies, and many other factors. All members of the Expedition are in good health, however, and we are all anxious to pursue our own various studies of this great canyon."

Gathering storm clouds gave warning of the approaching rainy season, and because of the danger of being trapped in the Barranca area by swollen streams and slippery trails, it was decided that only a few days could be spent in the bottom of the canyon proper. As a result of this decision, the following days were filled with activity. The canyon yielded a wealth of ornithological material—bright-colored parrots of several species, trogons, motmots, tiger bitterns, magpie jays, orioles, squirrel cuckoos, cardinals and other

FIG. 13—Tarahumare Indian house at halfway down the canyon's west slope, 4700 feet elevation





FIG. 14—Expedition camp at the very bottom of the Barranca de Cobre (2900 ft. elevation)

tropical species to round out our fast-growing collections.

Bob Ariss, the expedition's anthropologist, busied himself with the acquisition of not only an excellent collection of present-day items of Tarahumare clothing and household implements, but wire recordings of Indian dialect and songs as well.* Several interesting families of Tarahumares were found living in the Barranca, and Ariss lost no time in making their acquaintance.

The bottom of the canyon proved to be quite hot and humid, and to add still further to the discomfort of expedition members, large numbers of small, black, blood-sucking flies were always nearby to bite hands, ankles and faces not properly smeared with insect repellent.

Juan Vega, with his eye on the gathering rain clouds, fretted like a mother hen for fear we would tarry too long in the bottom. After four and a half busy days on the banks of the Urique, we heeded his warnings and began the long hard climb to the Barranca's rim.

After a short pause at the top to enable expedition members to complete bits of unfinished work and secure further photographs, the pack train began the long trek homeward toward Rancho Guirocoba, following the same route as travelled before but stopping at several collecting localities en route, where valuable material had been ob-

served. Homeward bound, the mules and burros moved fast, because now their loads were lighter, the trail was downhill for the most part, and ahead of them was the vision of a long rest and abundant food at Guirocoba. Except for the stops made for specimen collecting along the trail, the expedition moved rapidly southwestward and arrived at Guirocoba on the afternoon of June 3rd.

The great canyon had finally been reached, and Mr. Sheffler's dreams and plans of nineteen years had at last been realized! As the Barranca was left behind, all of us realized that we had seen but a small bit of its grandeur, and for all the scientific secrets we had pried from it, many more remained still unsolved in those mist-filled tributaries of the Urique.

The expedition had shown that the bottom of the canyon does harbor an arid tropical plant growth with its corresponding forms of tropical bird life. The answer to the question as to whether or not the birds from the midwestern United States use the great canyon as a gateway to the coastal plains of Sinaloa, remains as yet a secret to be solved. There is comfort, however, in the thought that we have not solved all the biological problems of the Barranca de Cobre—had we done so, there would be no excuse to return to that fascinating canyon, and to return again some day is the Museum's hope.

—KENNETH E. STAGER

*An article by Mr. Ariss dealing with the Indians of the Barranca area will appear in the *Quarterly* at a later date.

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